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# KENNETH ANGER

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All images courtesy of Kenneth Anger

Since 1937, Kenneth Anger, the American cult author of Hollywood Babylon and experimental filmmaker, has produced over 40 works, nine under the rubric Magick Lantern Cycle. Now 85, Anger looks two decades younger, and is still devoted to cinema. His short, trippy, and musical films reveal his obsession with satanic references, occult religions, and his groundbreaking interest in homoerotic imagery. Anger's latest movie is a mystical, two-minute-32-second animated collage that treats the Missoni fashion house like a dark beauty cult. Anger is extremely private and

difficult to pin-down for an interview. I met him on Hollywood Boulevard at Musso & Frank Grill, Hollywood's oldest restaurant. He arrived dressed in a Valentino suit, a gift from the designer, and ordered chicken pot pie.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You grew up right here in Southern California, in Santa Monica and Beverly Hills. What were your childhood pastimes?*
KENNETH ANGER — I started making movies with a 16mm camera when I was eight years old. But I wouldn't call it a pastime. It was already my passion.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You made Fireworks (1947) when you were just 17. What led up to that?*
KENNETH ANGER — I had already made shorter films. Usually, I'd take a piece of pop music and work from it — like the Mills Brothers' "Who Has Been Rocking My Dream Boat?" I made a film based on it called Who Has Been Rocking My Dream Boat (1941).

ALEX ISRAEL — *When you were growing up did you spend much time at the beach or in the Canyons?*
KENNETH ANGER — Occasionally. But I wasn't a surfer.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Weren't you interested in magic?*
KENNETH ANGER — Yes, but mostly in metaphysical magic. I read Aleister Crowley when I was a teenager.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Didn't you love reading the Hollywood gossip columns?*
KENNETH ANGER — Well, that was what you could call a hobby. But it wasn't only the gossip columns — I went to Beverly Hills High School, which was a gossip factory.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How so?*
KENNETH ANGER — Many of the kids at that school were the sons and daughters of producers and actors, so they had very interesting stories to tell. They were quite informative. Maybe some of those stories shouldn't have been told. But Hollywood's always had a dark side and a lot of broken hearts. People fall by the wayside, some of them rather spectacularly.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've said that your Hollywood Babylon books were as much about the pictures as they were about the text. Are the pictures in the books images that you clipped and saved over the course of your life?*
KENNETH ANGER — I have a big collection of original stills. The studios made many 8 x 10 black-and-white photos of all their stars, as part of film promotion. They had wonderful stills from all the films, which they sent out as publicity. That tradition is finished.

ALEX ISRAEL — *When you were a child you had a part in Max Reinhardt's 1935 production of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Did you ever envision having an acting career?*

KENNETH ANGER — No. I was in that film because my grandmother knew Max Reinhardt. That little part — that of the changeling — took a couple of weeks to do, and it was fun. I got to meet Mickey Rooney, and of course we're still friends.

ALEX ISRAEL — *So you were always more interested in being behind the camera.*
KENNETH ANGER — Yeah.

ALEX ISRAEL — *When you were making your short films, did you ever imagine that one day you'd be making mainstream Hollywood features?*
KENNETH ANGER — No, I've always considered myself as an artist who works outside of the system. I never wanted to be part of the so-called Hollywood industry.

ALEX ISRAEL — *That's amazing, considering that there are so few outlets for filmmakers outside the system, especially in LA.*
KENNETH ANGER — I just wanted to make my own little films, and I was very happy to work with 16mm stock. I also worked with 35 mm, and it's great, too. Now I'm working on digital. It's all just a means of capturing images.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How would you describe the relationship you had with Hollywood when you were a young filmmaker?*
KENNETH ANGER — Well, I knew a lot of people who worked in Hollywood, because I knew the sons and daughters of producers, actors, and so forth. I became very good friends with James Whale, the director of Frankenstein, The Old Dark House, and many other interesting films.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You moved to France in the '50s. Was it because you needed to get away from LA and the Hollywood system?*
KENNETH ANGER — I probably would have gone into the industry, but around 1950 I chose to go to France. It was during a very unpleasant time in Hollywood, because of Senator McCarthy and the ridiculous Red Scare. Friends of mine were being given a hard time. I wasn't involved in any political scene at that time, but I still found it very unpleasant. In France I got a job working for the Cinémathèque Française.

ALEX ISRAEL — *If you had stayed and worked in Hollywood, what do you think you would have done?*
KENNETH ANGER — I don't know, maybe Film Noir? I admired Nicholas Ray, and he stayed and worked in the system. Interesting work was done at that time. In any case, I wanted to explore Europe. I lived in Paris for quite a while, and I met a lot of interesting people there, like Cocteau, Bresson, and Marcel Carné.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've had a tremendous influence on filmmakers. How would you define your present relationship to Hollywood?*

KENNETH ANGER — Well, my contacts here are mostly with technicians. I know more cameramen and special effects people here in the States than I do top-name directors and people like that. But I still enjoy living here.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I admire the way you do so much with so little. You've been able to create enduring epics with modest means.*
KENNETH ANGER — That's the challenge. I knew how much I had to work with, but I also had to know how to get the effect I wanted without having access to elaborate studios, equipment, lighting, and so on. I always had high standards, and I always aimed to maintain them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Even when working with small budgets, you created magical effects, using techniques that seemed handmade. Were you thinking about creating a simpler kind of cinematic beauty — as well as the effect it might have on the viewer?*
KENNETH ANGER — No, when I make a film I don't think about viewers. I think about what I want. My films are basically handmade artifacts. They're more like paintings or ceramics.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Did you ever paint?*
KENNETH ANGER — I don't paint, but I sketch.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What compelled you to begin using pop music in your films? That was a very radical decision — people hadn't heard pop music in the cinema before.*
KENNETH ANGER — I felt that I could use it in an interesting way. One of my earliest films, the one that used the Mills Brothers' "Who Has Been Rocking My Dream Boat?" was a little film I made about the approaching war. In the summer of 1941 you could feel the war coming. Kids felt it, though it hadn't started yet.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How old were you?*
KENNETH ANGER — I was about 14. I never even bothered with royalties. It wasn't until the '60s, when I made Scorpio Rising that I realized I had to pay music royalties. Anyway, the earlier films were shown in a very limited way. When Scorpio Rising became so popular, I had a copyright lawyer clear a dozen or so songs that were included in it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are you still a fan of popular music? Do you listen to the radio?*
KENNETH ANGER — Yeah. But the trouble is, I don't like the current crop. I like '50s and '60s pop. I'm even quite fond of doo-wop, though I only used it once, for Rabbit's Moon.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You make music, too. What's Technicolor Skull with Brian Butler like? Is it pop?*
KENNETH ANGER — Techno! It's a combination of live music and projected images. I play the Theremin, which I learned how to play for this project.

Brian plays electric guitar. Then the images are projected. Quite a bit of the sound is actually from the soundtrack of the film that's being projected.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I'm curious about your use of dissolves, and how overlapping veils of imagery and iconic symbols became signature attributes of your filmmaking style.*
KENNETH ANGER — I know all the techniques of making movies, and I very much admire Josef von Sternberg's use of slow dissolves in his Dietrich films. That was an influence.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I recall you mentioning in an interview that Aleister Crowley thought color had properties beyond the retinal.*
KENNETH ANGER — In the magical system Crowley adhered to, colors were charged with power. There was a masculine, or kings', scale of colors, which was stronger and less diluted; and a feminine, or queens', scale, which was more pastel. I've studied his system and applied it to my work.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Have the colors of the Southern California landscape — the sunsets, the brightness — played a role in defining the color palette of your films?*
KENNETH ANGER — It has had quite a lot to do with it, yes.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Does the preparation of your films begin with your writing a script?*
KENNETH ANGER — I usually have a general theme in mind, but I don't work from a tight script. I leave room for improvisation.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Which of your films do you think the most about these days?*
KENNETH ANGER — Uniform Attraction, which is about uniform fetish.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Uniforms play a symbolic role in Fireworks, no?*
KENNETH ANGER — Yes, the sailors' suits do.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Summer sailor' suits?*
KENNETH ANGER — White suits. But in Uniform Attraction I had both army and navy suits.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Where can people see your films?*
KENNETH ANGER — They're shown on a regular basis at the Anthology Film Archives in New York, for one.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Where would you most like them to be screened?*
KENNETH ANGER — Well, I like big screens, so I suppose I'd go for Radio City Music Hall!

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've made work specifically for the art world, for galleries and museums. What interests you most about the art world?*
KENNETH ANGER — It's just another spin-off, another way for me to express

myself. I based one exhibition on frame enlargements from my films, blown up really big.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've said that your way of working is like painting. Does seeing a frame from one of your films, frozen and enlarged, realize this idea for you?*
KENNETH ANGER — Well, since I do it, I would have to say it does. [Laughs]

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you go around and look at art?*
KENNETH ANGER — Yes, I go to museums and galleries regularly. I go to the movies several times a month. I've got great choices here in Hollywood. I'm going to the TCM Classic Film Festival at Grauman's Chinese Theater. I went last year, when the festival's revelation was a movie made in 1933 called The Story of Temple Drake, featuring Miriam Hopkins. It's based on William Faulkner's Sanctuary. Temple Drake is the leading character in Sanctuary, which is a very interesting, almost Southern Gothic sort of novel. Jack La Rue plays a sort of psycho gangster in the film.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I saw an ad saying that they're screening An American in Paris this year.*
KENNETH ANGER — I'll probably go see that.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What else are you doing these days?*
KENNETH ANGER — I'm always working on a film in some way or other. My most recent one is a portrait of Benedikt Taschen, the son of the German publisher. He was visiting LA, and I did a portrait of him on his birthday, which I'm calling "Benedikt Taschen @ 23." I wanted to make a film about him because I thought he was an interesting guy. I asked him if I could do it and he said yes. That's about it. He lives in Germany. He was just over here on a visit. His father owns that round flying saucer house.

ALEX ISRAEL — *John Lautner's Chemosphere House. Did you shoot the film there?*
KENNETH ANGER — No, but I have been up there several times.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you ever walk up and down Hollywood Boulevard?*
KENNETH ANGER — When I have to. It's not a very appealing street anymore. I like Hollywoodland, which is the little area beneath the Hollywood sign. I like walking around up there, up in Beachwood Canyon. The original sign said "Hollywoodland" — it was promoting that area of real estate. They tore off the "land" part, and had the sign refurbished when it was falling apart. Originally it was outlined in lights and it could be seen at night. There are a few photographs around of it lit up. It would flash on "Holly," "Wood," "Land," and then "Hollywoodland." It was quite elaborate, but only lasted about five years.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You don't own a telephone or a television. There's something powerfully attractive about pulling back from constant contact.*
KENNETH ANGER — Well, at this stage of my life, I just don't want a phone. I'm sort of allergic to telephones, so I don't have one. If I absolutely have to make a phone call, I'll go out and use a payphone — though they're becoming harder to find.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Your work has recently been embraced by the fashion world. You've worked with both Missoni and Valentino. Why do you think this is happening now?*
KENNETH ANGER — I don't know. They sort of discovered me. [Laughs] Valentino invited me to design a show, which I was pleased to do. While the girls were on the runway they showed images from my film Eaux D'Artifice, printed in blue, with water patterns on the walls.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What is it about the fashion world that engages you?*
KENNETH ANGER — Well, I think clothes are a form of creative expression, and I've always had friends in the fashion world. I was a good friend of Pierre Balmain when I lived in Paris. I used to go to the shows for Christian Dior and others, just because we were friends and they would invite me.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've been called a living legend. What does that feel like?*
KENNETH ANGER — People put little labels on you. It doesn't really mean anything to me. But I guess I'd rather have that said about me than something nasty, like "infamous" or something like that.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What should all young Hollywood Babylon hopefuls know before they head out west?*
KENNETH ANGER — [Laughs] That there's only a chance in a thousand that they'll get anywhere.

ALEX ISRAEL — *And what advice would you give to a young creative person who, like you, thinks and works outside of the system?*
KENNETH ANGER — Believe in yourself and go for it. That's about it. You don't need a lot of money. You can make films quite reasonably if you plan ahead. You don't need a big crew. There are simple ways of doing things. I wrote an article in the Cahiers du Cinéma in the '50s called "Modesty and the Art of Film," which explained my credo. You can have modest ambitions and make it all work.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is there anything else you'd like the world to know about Kenneth Anger?*
KENNETH ANGER — Yes. That I don't feel like my creative period is in the past, but in the present. I'm still making films and enjoying it. And I'll continue to do so.

END

## Lucifer rising at the Russian Embassy by SIMON LIBERATI

In 1966, eleven years after finishing his film Thelema Abbey, about the strange frescoes of Aleister Crowley in the town of Cefalu in Sicily, Kenneth Anger moved to San Francisco, to 1098 Fulton Street. The building, in the Gothic Victorian style, a great shambling giant of a house, was also called the Russian Embassy House. It was once a nightclub run by Russian émigrés and it was here that Anger worked on the film which would evoke most explicitly his talents, the bleakest black and pinkest heart of his entire œuvre: Lucifer Rising.

Two films came out of this project: Invocation of My Demon Brother in 1969, and Lucifer rising in 1972. Invocation of My Demon Brother is easily identified via its syncopated, strobing rhythms, its themes lifted directly from the filmmaker's own past. But the Magic Lantern, pederasty, devilry, swastikas, and the Hell's Angels … had more to do with Scorpio Rising. Bobby Beausoleil, the musician and renaissance figure, appears in it briefly with Anton LaVey, wearing his famous top hat (worn by W.C. Fields and Mr. Giggs). It was the magical round, the lantern of Golo, the parade of bad boy angels. Slower, more hallucinatory, not typical, giddier, more unhealthy, more hippie and somehow more old-fashioned, Lucifer Rising, shot in 1972, re-uses material shot in 1966-67 with the young. still baby-faced Beausoleil, without his hat. His scene, shot Interior Day, shutters tightly closed, is the awakening of the angel. We recognise the purplish, orange and rose tints from the walls of the Russian Embassy House, echoing the first tableau in which the beautiful Myriam Gibril plays an old Hollywood Isis figure while the flying saucers of the Age of Aquarius zoom in between the temples. The scene plays at a majestic, Wagnerian tempo, a sort of homage to the awakening of Brunhilde and the films of D.W. Griffith. The music Beausoleil composed, much later, when he was in prison for the first Manson murders, cradles Bobby's awakening, while he was still young, loaded – and a free man.

"When I arrived at Kenneth's house, there was a young man living in the apartment. Kenneth asked him to pack up his stuff, saying about me, "Lucifer – that's him," said Bobby Beausoleil to the journalist John Gilmore, from his jail cell, "Kenneth knew how to bring out the disobedient angel in me, it was a turning point in my life."

In homage to this costly metamorphosis and the unique Kenneth Anger signature, I introduced into my novel Jayne Mansfield 1967 the disobedient angel's top hat inside the Bentley with Jayne Mansfield's furs, in the episode dealing with the San Francisco Festival (which took place on October 19, 1966, 13 days before the official banning of LSD in the state

of California). The avatar of Beausoleil proffers infected sugar cubes in a dirty hand to a fiend of old Hollywood, a symbol of the underground trying (and not succeeding) to make it through the star system